# Tactical IO in Support of Time Sensitive Planning

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**Editorial Abstract:** *The author provides a narrative account of a joint IO Cell in action, examining direct "here and now" application of information operations during a recent combat rescue in Afghanistan. He describes how IO core capabilities can successfully serve planners and operators throughout critical, fast-paced mission planning and execution phases.*

Information Operations (IO) planners serving at Joint Task Forces, brigades, and below are experiencing an increase in the need for tactical-level IO understanding, planning, execution, and assessing of military operations. Conversely, many Department of Defense (DOD) IO courses focus primarily on providing insight to operational and strategic level planning. Although possessing proficiency at these levels is important, they do not adequately address the growing challenges associated with today's front-line operations. Joint and Service doctrine and education are currently addressing the addition of tactical IO in order to increase the level of proficiency and effectiveness of IO planners. Many of the collective efforts achieving success in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom can be attributed to actions planned and executed at the tactical level. This is especially true when examining our maneuver force's current strategies in dealing with the present day Iraqi insurgency and the recent resurgence of Taliban activity throughout Afghanistan. Commanders have paid close attention to increasing their requisite skills in face-to-face engagements and cultural awareness, as interaction with local civilians at the tactical level has become increasingly necessary and beneficial.

The US Army's Functional Area 30 (Information Operations) recruitment brief articulates the need for individuals who are tactically and technically proficient at synchronizing all aspects of core, supporting, and related IO capabilities and activities. As an example, better preparing an IO planner to manage the complexities of a counter-insurgency is paramount to the long-term success of maneuver operations, and the mitigation of risk to ground forces. Additionally, possessing tactical IO knowledge serves to increase the commander's confidence in his IO Cell's planning abilities while strengthening his own understanding of how IO supports his operations.

Many lessons gathered from IO practitioners' "down-range" experiences indicate there is no clear delineation between tactical and operational level IO; rather, there is considerable overlap between the two. Having fundamental knowledge of both operational and tactical IO enables the IO planner to accurately select and integrate capabilities to achieve desired effects. It is important to note that planners can often leverage tactical IO activities and efforts to support or accomplish higher level objectives. IO planners routinely use information obtained at the tactical level to gauge the



*MH-47 returns from a mission. (Defense Link)*

effectiveness or modify current deliberate plans, strategies, and operations. This "passing up" of information also works well for Time Sensitive Planning (TSP). When unforeseen or unplanned events warrant, IO planners find that tactical IO provides the quickest and most effective means to achieve desired effects. The following scenario illustrates how tactical IO supported a classified Joint Task Force's June 2005 Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) mission in Eastern Afghanistan. The IO Cell, during the TSP process, integrated various elements of Psychological Operations (PSYOP), Electronic Warfare (EW), Military Deception (MILDEC), and Civil Affairs (CA) to support the commander's main objectives. Although the scenario is based on true events, some of the content, to include individual's names and specific unit designations, has been omitted to protect classified or sensitive operational material.

## The Mission

For the final twenty minutes of its journey, the blacked-out MH-47 special operations Chinook helicopter hugged the terrain closely as it approached its objective. The men in the rear stood silently ready for what would become their final mission. Abdullah Khan, their High Value Individual or HVI, was a prominent Tribal Warlord and Anti-Coalition Member (ACM). Khan operated freely throughout the Korangal Valley near the city of Asadabad. He was adept at coordinating logistics and movements of foreign fighters eager to strike against the fledgling Afghan Army and the Coalition. Capturing Khan

*Message delivery over the provinces. (Defense Link)*

would yield a significant blow to his network and strengthen the Government of Afghanistan's (GOA) control and influence throughout the province. As the chopper descended onto the objective, the pilot expertly adjusted the controls, bleeding off much of the bird's forward momentum and lift. The airframe shuddered as the rotor blades bit hard into the thin mountain air. In a matter of seconds the elite operators would exit into the cool summer night and begin their mission.

Ahmad Rahman, a wiry Afghan man in his early thirties, had been leading his small band of jihad fighters through the mountainous terrain for most of the night. They had been patrolling the inhospitable terrain for several days, hoping to ambush coalition convoys on their way to and from Camp Blessings. As they neared the final ridge, Ahmad paused in a small clearing to check the condition of his mujahideen. Suddenly, from seemingly out of nowhere, a descending helicopter appeared overhead.

The first RPG struck the aircraft's rear rotor assembly and caused the bird to thrust downward violently. Within seconds following the first impact, a second RPG streaked across the small clearing and detonated against the Chinook's starboard pontoon. The bird pitched sharply to the right and, despite the pilot's valiant maneuvers, rolled onto its side and impacted into the rocky hilltop. With rotor blades splintering, the Chinook, crew, and human cargo tumbled helplessly off the hill and down the steep embankment. The disintegrating airframe ripped up trees, dirt, and rocks as it made its way into the ravine below.

High above a circling AC-130 Specter Gunship captured the carnage in its entirety. Its Forward Looking Infrared Radar showed a heavy signature of heat, suggesting to any prudent observer that there were no survivors. All attempts to radio the Chinook went unanswered. Back in the command center at Bagram Air Base, the Task Force Commander and his J3 stared ominously at the video feed coming from the lone Predator, which had been monitoring the team's insertion. The commander, not directing his order to anyone in particular, said solemnly, "alert the CSAR team and assemble the staff."

This type of scenario is just one of many that fall under the category of TSP. Generally, IO planners have a good understanding of how IO supports long-term objectives, which concentrate on changing perceptions and influencing
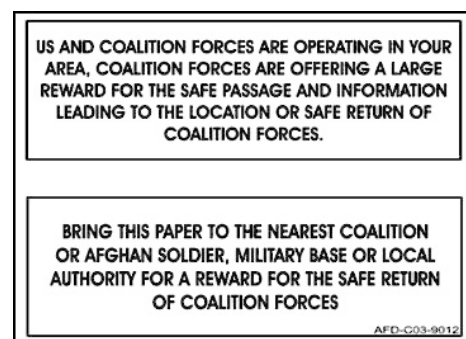
populations to behave favorably toward US and its interests. However, when the operational tempo is high and time is limited, the IO planner must quickly shift his focus and begin to think tactically. What tactical IO capabilities or resources are readily available for an IO planner to integrate and synchronize with the maneuver plan to increase the likeliness of mission success? Some planners refer to tactical IO as being "surgical" in that it is applied relatively quickly to achieve a very precise effect. In this type of scenario, the IO planner must be able to effectively apply tactical IO capabilities and resources to immediately support the Task Force's combat search and rescue efforts.

The Task Force IO officer sat in the Joint Operations Center (JOC) contemplating what actions were required. The commander's guidance was perfectly clear, but presented some difficult planning challenges given the fact that time was extremely limited. The commander's expectations for IO were high and indicated he placed great value on its potential contributions.

"First and foremost, I want you to integrate IO to support every aspect of the recovery operation. I also see IO as being an integral part in preventing further attacks against the Task Force. Lastly, tell me how IO can support the Task Force in obtaining actionable intelligence for potential follow on Direct Action missions."

The main question debated during the follow-on IO coordination meeting pertained to what capabilities and resources could support and, more importantly, how to effectively integrate them with the CSAR, force protection, and intelligence gathering plans. Careful analysis, consideration, and selection of IO capabilities would either produce positive results or compound the already surmounting feelings of frustration being felt throughout the Task Force. The J3, having stood up the Crisis Action Center (CAC), had a handful of operational and intelligence planners developing potential courses of action; resources were limited and timeliness was an essential factor.

The injured operator lay motionless under the clear night sky among scattered equipment and smoldering debris. Slowly, as he regained consciousness he heard the sound of unfamiliar voices approaching. He suddenly realized the gravity of the situation and the need to act quickly. After finding no other survivors, he stealthily made his way eastward, carefully



US AND COALITION FORCES ARE OPERATING IN YOUR AREA. COALITION FORCES ARE OFFERING A LARGE REWARD FOR THE SAFE PASSAGE AND INFORMATION LEADING TO THE LOCATION OR SAFE RETURN OF COALITION FORCES.

BRING THIS PAPER TO THE NEAREST COALITION OR AFGHAN SOLDIER, MILITARY BASE OR LOCAL AUTHORITY FOR A REWARD FOR THE SAFE RETURN OF COALITION FORCES

AFD-C03-9012

*Recovery incentive leaflet. (JIOWC)*

following the pre designated escape and evasion route. He periodically attempted to establish radio contact using his survival radio but was unsuccessful; the antenna had been damaged in the crash.

The PSYOP Support Element (PSE) recommended using leaflet messages to target three separate and distinct audiences. The first message was intended for survivors and contained information pertaining to the impending search and rescue efforts. Informing survivors that help was on its way went a long way in bolstering morale and strengthening their psychological well-being. The second message targeted local Afghan civilians and solicited useful information and rendering of aid. Intent was to drop these messages on surrounding towns in proximity of the crash site and along the escape route. The third message would target the ACM themselves and instruct them to cease all offensive operations. Non compliance meant they would become valid Coalition targets. Once the commander approved the messages, the translators began the tedious task of translating the messages into Pashto and Dari, the two most commonly spoken languages in the valley. Having dedicated intelligence support to the IO cell provided accurate data on the population's demographics and sentiments, which ensured translated messages would resonate with the audiences. It is crucial for IO planners to understand the PSYOP production process and, more importantly, how much time is necessary to produce PSYOP products. With TSP, quality of the finished product may be sacrificed for quicker production times. In this case, the TPT chose to produce leaflets in black and white and excluded the use of complicated graphics.



*Recovery crewman scans the terrain. (Defense Link)*

IO planners must be able to accurately inform the commander on how long it will take to generate the required number of leaflets to accomplish stated objectives.

Back in the Air Component cell, the Task Force's Electronic Warfare Officer (EWO) recommended using elements of EW to disrupt both adversary early warning and command and control assets. Electronic Attack (EA) would focus on jamming selected ACM frequencies near the crash site and along the escape route. Additionally, operators would employ direction finding equipment to determine the location of potential survivors or coalition radios that fell into enemy hands. The EWO had four years of experience aboard an EC-130 Compass Call and discussed potential options with the IO officer. Working with the intelligence section, he identified adversary push-to-talk frequencies commonly used in that remote area of Afghanistan. The EWO, using Falcon View software and air charts, quickly identified areas best suited to execute the EA mission. Jamming required unobstructed line-of-sight and given the extreme terrain, the Compass Call would require substantial stand-off distance and altitude. The EWO was also vigilant in deconflicting all "targeted" frequencies with maneuver, so as not to disrupt or degrade friendly communications during execution. Elements of special operations task forces often operate autonomously within a conventional commander's area of operations. Indiscriminate and uncoordinated jamming has often led to unintentional but adverse affects on other operations. With this in mind, IO and EW planners must coordinate and deconflict all jamming activities with the established Joint Restricted Frequency List (JRFL).

The MC-130 Combat Talon aircraft rolled off the runway at 0315 in the morning. The sun was still below the eastern horizon as the aircraft banked sharply north toward the distant Hindu-Kush Mountains. The PSE NCOIC stood in the rear of the craft and waited anxiously for the signal to get ready. It would take the Talon approximately 45 minutes to enter the target area. The NCO gainfully used this time to double check static lines, ties, and boxes. Now was not the time for any malfunctions; proper leaflet dispersion depended not only on correct aircraft altitude, speed, and attitude, but on how well the boxes had been packed and assembled. The PSYOP officer and Talon commander determined optimum flight factors using several planning tools to include Falcon View software. Having an accurate depiction of terrain features and their characteristics aids the flight commander in selecting the most advantageous route to service all targets. The best routes are those that minimize air time, allow for maximum leaflet dispersion over the target area, and reduce potential threats to the aircraft.

The Task Force's Civil Affairs officer had been trying to get back to Bagram Air Base before nightfall. His driver drove as fast as the potholed road allowed, and spent much of the two hour trip switching between the break and accelerator. The Soviet-built road was treacherous and showed years of neglect. What made it worse were the slow moving and heavily laden jinga trucks that hugged the center lane, and operated with no lights. Maneuvering safely around these vehicles was difficult. The command center radioed the CA officer and instructed him to abort the meeting with the Kabul Provisional Reconstruction Team (PRT) and return to base immediately. He wasn't given specifics, but knew the order was urgent and assumed he was being called back to deploy one of his tactical teams.

At approximately 0400 hours, the first of many 35K leaflet boxes opened up in the night sky over the scattered villages. Aside from an occasional light resonating from a house or clay compound, there wasn't much to indicate the aircraft was over any of its intended targets. The PSYOP NCO worked

flawlessly; his hands-on experiences in rigging boxes and dispensing leaflets were honed over many previous missions. Tensions among the crew were always high during leaflet drops as the low-flying aircraft occasionally attracted ill-aimed small-arms fire. Nine more villages would receive similar packages before completion of the mission.

Shortly after sunrise, the weary operator reluctantly entered a small village. Badly needing medical attention, he asked the village elder for temporary safe haven. The village elder, having read the various leaflet messages dropped only hours earlier, was fully apprised of the situation. Fortunately, he was not one of the many individuals who were sympathetic to the Taliban or other ACM groups that operated throughout the valley. He instructed Mohamed, his son, to quickly get word to the Coalition that they had a wounded US service member in their custody. As Camp Blessings was nearly 15 kilometers away, Mohamed had an arduous journey ahead, but he was determined to get help. Fortunately, the leaflets had made their way to a friendly village and the Afghans were more than willing to provide assistance.

Later that morning, news arrived at the Task Force that at least one service member had survived the crash and was awaiting extraction. The next phase of the operation would commence at nightfall with the launching of the rescue package. A Tactical PSYOP Team (TPT) would accompany the rescue team and assist with actions on the objective. The TPT, once on the ground, would concentrate on mitigating risks to the villagers and using dedicated interpreters, would quickly gather information on local ACM activities. Obtaining useful information or "actionable intelligence" would meet the commander's third objective and hopefully, aid in bringing Ahmad Rahman and his men to justice.

The IO officer held another coordination meeting and determined that MILDEC could support the extraction phase of the operation. Using Task Force rotary-wing assets to simulate multiple combat insertions north of the village would reduce the likeliness of armed confrontation during execution. The intent of the deception was to draw ACM away from the actual extraction site and keep them preoccupied. An AC-130 gunship would provide cover for the false insertions and was prepared to engage any hostiles.

At the sound of approaching helicopters, Abdullah Khan's men furiously attempted to coordinate a hasty attack. Taking down another Coalition aircraft would strengthen resolve and increase credibility with other foreign fighter or ACM groups. The Compass Call, having identified several other adversary radio frequencies near the village, continued jamming. Unable to communicate, Khan was not in a position to mount an effective offensive against the approaching Coalition forces. His men watched helplessly on the fringes as the CSAR birds swooped in and executed the final segment of their mission. Within minutes of landing, the special operator was safely in the hands of the Coalition.

Upon hearing of the villager's actions, the Civil Affairs officer began preparing humanitarian assistance bundles as immediate compensation for the village. The interpreters, in their brief discussions with the villagers, captured a list of badly needed items, to include blankets, cooking oil, flour, and other various sundries. In an area predominantly anti-Coalition and anti-GOA, it was important to send the right message and to reward heroic individuals for their efforts. From a CA and IO perspective, this was an opportunity to extend special thanks and, more importantly, to establish a favorable relationship with the villagers. Additionally, the TPT identified several CA construction projects, which would go a long way in swaying local sentiments favorable to the Coalition. Having allies in this region would be extremely useful during future maneuver operations. The Task Force CA officer also coordinated with CJTF-76 Civil Affairs and the Asadabad PRT to conduct other village assessments throughout the area. The Task Force commander's intent was to strengthen Coalition presence and to develop beneficial relationships that would yield future support and actionable intelligence.

Unfortunately, despite extensive and continuous search efforts over the next several days, there were no other survivors. Not only had the Task Force lost a significant combat asset, it had lost valuable members of its tight-knit family. Although much media attention revolved around maneuver's actions, tactical Information Operations contributed significantly to the overall success of the mission. Careful selection and integration of tactical IO capabilities with the CSAR plan led to the successful recovery of the lone survivor. IO actions in support of the CSAR mission also had a profound and long-lasting strategic effect on the locals residing in the valley. Even months after completion of the recovery operation, locals continued to provide actionable intelligence. Much of the information supplied proved beneficial and ultimately led to the capture/kill of many ACM members who were responsible for the downing of the MH-47. Fortunately, to this day, the Task Force maintains a favorable position with many villagers throughout the province and continues to work with them in identifying potential threats to the Coalition. Tactical IO continues to support the Task Force and will, no doubt, continue to be a major asset in restoring regional stability while strengthening the government of Afghanistan. ☁